



United States Department of Agriculture
Forest Service

Rico Trails Project

Draft Decision Notice

Dolores Ranger District, San Juan National Forest
Montezuma County, Colorado

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Date

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Introduction

My decision is to implement the Spring Creek, Circle Trail and Ryman Trail re-route components of Alternative 3 - Proposed Action as described in the Rico Trails Project - Environmental Assessment. The specifics of my decision are described below. My decision is based on the analysis described in the Environmental Assessment (EA) and the Project Record. The EA is available at the Dolores Public Lands Office in Dolores, Colorado.

The Rio Grande Southern Trail component of the Proposed Action is being considered in a separate decision.

Proposed Project Location

The project area is in the vicinity of Rico, Colorado. The proposed trails are located to the east (Spring Creek Trail), south (Ryman Creek Trail) and southwest (Spring Creek Trail) of the Town of Rico. The proposed trails connect with existing motorized and non-motorized trails. The proposed trails are located on lands managed by the U.S. Forest Service, on the Dolores Ranger District of the San Juan National Forest.

Purpose of and Need for Action

Purpose - the proposed trails would provide connectivity and loop opportunities utilizing existing trail segments (where possible) and would provide better route alignments that protect sensitive resources. Designating trails with cooperating organizations provides volunteer commitment to trail maintenance and increased connection between local communities and adjacent public lands by way of recreation opportunity, trail work and social outreach between volunteers.

Need – respond to requests from the Rico Trails Alliance and the San Juan Trail Riders for additional trails and associated non-motorized and motorized recreation opportunities.

Public Involvement and Consultation

In September 2019 the Rico Trails Project was listed on the Forest Service's Planning, Appeals and Litigation System website (Project #56748) and in the San Juan National Forest Schedule of Proposed Actions. An information meeting for the project was held on September 23, 2019 at the Dolores Public Lands Office

A draft EA was released, and a 30-day public comment period was initiated on February 25, 2020. In addition, a request for comment letter for the draft EA was sent to 51 individuals, government agencies and interest groups. A revised draft EA was released, and a 30-day public comment period was initiated on June 24, 2020. A request for comment letter for the revised draft EA was sent to 51 individuals, government agencies and interest groups.

Consultation with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service was initiated on October 25, 2019.

In accordance with 36 CFR Section 800.3(f) and Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act, consultation was conducted with 25 federally recognized Native American tribes. Formal letters initiating consultation for the project were mailed to all federally recognized tribes on February 25, 2020.

Decision

I have reviewed the EA and the information contained in the project file. I have also reviewed and considered the public comment submitted on this project. I have determined that there is adequate information to make a reasoned choice among alternatives. It is my decision to select implement the Spring Creek, Circle Trail and Ryman Trail re-route components as described in Alternative 3 - Proposed Action of the Final EA.

Specifics of the Decision

This decision designates two new trails (Spring Creek – 6.1 miles and Circle Trail 2.6 miles), realignment of the existing Ryman Creek Trail, and decommissions approximately 9.7 miles of non-motorized trails in the vicinity of the Spring Creek and Stoner Creek. The following is a summary of the general location and proposed use for each trail.

Spring Creek Trail - the proposed Spring Creek Trail relocation consists of 3.4 miles of new motorized single track and 2.7 miles of existing motorized single track (6.1 miles total). The proposed trail would replace the existing Spring Creek Trail (National Forest System Route (NFSR) #627) which was designated as non-motorized in the 2018 Rico West Dolores Roads and Trails (Travel Management) Project Record of Decision. The previously designated non-motorized trail in the bottom of the Spring Creek drainage (approximately 3.5 miles) would be decommissioned and the new trail would be constructed and maintained in an adjacent ridge top location. A 0.75-mile segment of the Stoner Creek Trail (NFSR #625) would be changed from single track non-motorized to single track motorized to provide a motorized loop connection from Taylor Mesa to Stoner Mesa. An armored low water crossing would be constructed and maintained for the crossing of Stoner Creek.

The single track - motorized segment of the Stoner Creek Trail (NFSR #625) from the east end of West Twin Springs Trail (#739) to the intersection with East Twin Springs Trail (NFSR #741), would remain open for motorized use as currently designated. The small acreage of habitat protection (approximately 350 acres) that could have been gained by designating this trail as non-motorized was determined to not be justified, relative to the recreation benefit that the existing trail provides, and would offer in conjunction with the proposed Spring Creek motorized trail.

One additional trail closure (decommissioning) would also be implemented as part of the proposed action. The non-motorized segment of the Stoner Creek Trail (NFSR #625) from the intersection with the proposed Spring Trail to the dead end at private land, approximately 6.2 miles, would be closed.

Ryman Creek Trail – two trail reroutes (new trail construction) are proposed for the existing non-motorized Ryman Creek Trail, to provide a more sustainable route. The total length of the proposed reroutes would be 2.5 miles. The existing route segments that are proposed to be replaced would be rehabilitated after the new construction is complete. The Ryman Creek Trail would have a seasonal access restriction as described in Design Elements.

Circle Trail - this is an existing Forest Service non-system trail that is a popular non-motorized connection between the Town of Rico and the Black Hawk section of the Colorado Trail. The proposed 2.6-mile trail would be designated for non-motorized use. As an existing non-system trail the proposed route would only require limited trail work for improvement to meet U. S. Forest Service trail standards.

Design Elements

Cultural

1. If a previously undocumented historic property is discovered, or if inadvertent effects occur to a historic property, all work in the vicinity of the property shall cease and a SJNF archaeologist shall be notified immediately. The property shall be protected and project activities in the immediate vicinity of the property shall not resume until any actions necessary to resolve adverse effects to the property have been completed.
2. Upon the discovery of human remains, funerary items, sacred objects, or objects of cultural patrimony, a SJNF archaeologist shall be immediately notified by telephone, with written confirmation. All project activities shall cease in the vicinity of the discovery, and the discovery shall be protected for 30 days, or until the contractor is given notice to proceed by a SJNF archaeologist

Hydrology and Soils

1. Select stream/ditch crossings that are hardened by gravel, cobble or bedrock. If none exist or in the case of swales or ephemeral drainage crossings, use local material to manually harden trail crossings.
2. Establish crossings at right angles to streams/ditches, where the stream/ditch is relatively straight and shallow, and where stream/ditch banks do not exceed a 30% slope.
3. Use hand tools to construct trail inside riparian areas.
4. Refer to and follow all applicable best management practices (BMPs) for motorized and non-motorized trails (pages 91-93) outlined in FS-990a, *National Best Management Practices for Water Quality Management on National Forest System Lands*. These BMPs are critical to address erosion potential that would otherwise be high, as well as other concerns.
5. Route or reroute trail alignments to avoid wetland features. The recommended minimum buffer distance is equal to 2 times the maximum diameter of the wetland up to a maximum of 100 feet.
6. Avoid the wetland during proposed bridge construction at the Scotch Creek trail head.
7. Design trail to protect against slope failure.
8. Minimize potential for head-cutting and channel incision by ensuring application of BMPs in locations where trail alignments cross intermittent drainages.

Rangelands and Rare Plants

1. Ground disturbance activities associated with trail constructions should be limited to the footprint necessary for trail establishment. This generally occurs in a linear feature. Weed prevention and suppression efforts will continue to occur throughout the project area.
2. Continue to install trail cattleguards or turnstiles at all fence crossings to minimize the need for trail users to open and close gates. In instances where a cattleguard is not feasible, a swing gate may be installed.

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3. Equipment shall be washed before entering a new area of project implementation.

Recreation

1. The project would be implemented according to trail management direction described in Forest Service Handbook 2309.15. Trails would be managed as a standard terra trail of Trail Class 2 or 3, with allowed uses of Pedestrian, Pack and Saddle, and Bicycle for the non-motorized trail proposals. Trails would be managed as a standard terra trail of Trail Class 2 or 3, with allowed uses of Pedestrian, Pack and Saddle, and Bicycle and Motorcycles, for the motorized trail proposals. Design specifications associated with several types of trail use may be incorporated in order to effectively manage and maintain a trail segment. For example, trail management may include vegetation clearing limits associated with Pack and Saddle in order to allow safe passage for stock. These same trails might also incorporate some tread width, grade, and surface design elements from design parameters associated with bicycles. Additional information about trail management concepts is provided in Forest Service Handbook 2309.18.
2. Trails would be built with an eye towards sustainability, site specific resource protection and low-cost maintenance vs. steep, unsustainable trails that require frequent maintenance. In addition, sustainable trails can also be maintained by volunteers who are able to complete light maintenance activities with limited FS oversight.
3. This FS would continue partnership programs with local motorized, horse, hiking and bike organizations to include trail maintenance, weed control and visitor education.
4. Monitor dispersed camping impacts while maintaining camping within 100 yards of a Forest System Road.
5. If funding is available, interpretive trail etiquette signs will be added that address all users including hikers, motorized users, horseback riders and mountain bike riders.
6. Install single track cattle guards and pedestrian gates where any trails cross fence lines.
7. Post "Please close gates" at locations where any trails cross fence lines.

Threatened, Endangered, Sensitive, and Species of Local Concern

1. Contact the district biologist if specific impacts to threatened, endangered, proposed, Region 2 sensitive species, or SJNF species of local concern and/or their habitats are identified prior to or during project implementation. Management of the project (e.g., timing restrictions or project boundary) may be adjusted as necessary to reduce impacts. The Region 2 sensitive species most likely to be present are Northern goshawk and Largeflower triteleia.

Vegetation and Fuels

1. If future vegetation management projects (timber or prescribed fire) occur within the proposed project area coordination between the SJNF Recreation, Fire, and Timber programs will occur prior to implementations. Temporary roads will be allowed to cross trails.

Wildlife

1. Survey for active raptor nests should be undertaken before constructing new sections of trails. If a raptor moves into an area near an existing designated trail, consult the SJNF Wildlife Biologist. Address new nests in accordance with Forest Plan Guideline 2.3.49 and Forest Plan Table 2.3.2.
2. The proposed trail use and management would conform with the Rico West Dolores Project Record of Decision, including the identified adaptive management options.
3. A seasonal access restriction from May 15 to June 30 would be applied to non-motorized use on the Ryman Creek Trail from the intersection with Salt Creek Trail to the Divide Road.

Rationale

Factors I considered in making my decision included the need for the action, analysis of impacts by Forest Service staff specialists, consequences of implementing the proposed action, consequences of *not* implementing the proposed action, best available science in the analysis and issues and public comments.

The proposed action builds on and continues the important collaboration between local interest groups, local government and the Dolores Ranger District. These collaborations provide opportunity for community members to participate in trails management and gain appreciation of the hard work needed to maintain and improve trails. In addition, the proposed action utilizes existing travel corridors and trails, minimizing new impacts. The proposed action was also designed to utilize route alignments that reduce impacts to natural resources. The proposed action also fulfills the commitment identified in the Rico/West Dolores Travel Management Planning effort to consider these options at a later date in a separate analysis.

The proposed trails provide connectivity and loop opportunities which improve the recreation experience for all user groups. The proposed trails are relatively short segments that create larger loops that can be accessed from different locations which will spread out users and provide more opportunity for access to trail opportunities.

The seasonal closure at Ryman Creek Trail will improve elk production habitat conditions in Ryman Creek drainage. This closure is important for the elk populations which have experienced decline in recent years. If declines continue or if numerous violations of the closure period are observed in any one year then additional seasonal closures, such as the Salt Creek Trail, may be considered in future analysis. The effectiveness of the closure will be evaluated along with other factors that are being monitored by Colorado Parks and Wildlife.

I closely considered comments that were received from the public. Some of the comments were incorporated into the preferred alternative, other comments were outside the scope of this analysis, but were provided to appropriate specialists for consideration during future project activities.